



Point of Contact

Centralized 311 call centers are designed to help citizens interact more easily with government, but they may benefit officials even more than citizens.

By W. Eric Martin

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In government and business, it's a given that every message from one citizen or customer represents more than one person's opinion. For every individual who sends an e-mail or preprinted postcard, two more share that point of view; each Web form completed effectively represents a handful of individuals; and every phone call counts as a dozen people speaking with one voice.

While these numbers aren't hard and fast by any means, they do demonstrate the difficulty government officials have in piecing together their constituents' views on both hot-button issues and more run-of-the-mill concerns.

Activist groups may help illuminate officials to residents' opinions on issues such as gay marriage and gun ownership, but few organizations have been founded to denounce potholes or abandoned cars in neighbors' yards. Residents with such minor, yet profoundly irritating, concerns previously worked their way through a tangle of "blue page" phone numbers until they hit the right department or official, gave their complaint, then crossed their fingers and waited.

Over the past five years, however, cities and counties both large and small have implemented 311 call centers that allow residents to register everyday complaints with ease. What's more, they receive answers to questions about the removal of bulky items, digging permits, school board meeting hours and more with a single phone call. The 311 call center acts as a governmental Wal-Mart, if you will, providing citizens everything they need in one location.

"Anytime you can centralize the point of contact for citizens, it makes it easier for them to get service," said Peter Collins, CIO for Austin, Texas, which plans to have calls to nearly all city departments routed through 311 by November 2004. "Plus they can get on the Web at night or on weekends, and submit details of problems."

One Ring Rules

While better service to citizens is good news to any official's ear, a 311 system can provide payoffs that more than make up for its costs. "It's a proactive management tool that lets you see the volume and type of calls, and how long it takes for them to be dealt with," said Collins. Data from incoming calls can be tracked and reviewed with customer relationship management (CRM) software.

Baltimore, the earliest 311 user, installed the system in October 1996 to ease the burden on its 911

operators, because that was the only way citizens could contact police at that time. The percentage of nonemergency 911 calls, which ran as high as 60 percent prior to 311, dropped dramatically. Additionally wait times are shorter and fewer calls are abandoned.

Currently cities and counties approach 311 service from two angles -- either an easy-to-remember replacement for an existing seven-digit nonemergency police number, or a one-stop center for citizen calls. Call center operators are hired or transferred from other departments, then trained to use several hundred scripts to address all types of calls. In some cities, each call receives a tracking number, similar to those used by overnight package services, so citizens can follow up if they don't see progress.

"311 has given us the ability to monitor constituents' requests from start to finish so we know how long it takes to get a request done," said Lisa Allen, Baltimore's call center manager. "Of course, as time goes by, we get more historical information and can better predict how long it will take a citizen to get a response."

In fact, Baltimore now guarantees potholes will be filled and graffiti removed within 48 hours. "We can make that claim because we have the data to back it up," said Baltimore CIO Elliot Schlanger. "It's not acceptable for a constituent to call and ask when a pothole will be fixed and we say, 'When we get to it.'"

Departments and agencies electronically transfer data from the 311 systems onto their own network, although many call centers have the ability to dispatch workers for emergency situations, such as water leaks.

"Before 311, Baltimore had a little call center in every agency with its own 10-digit number that was open only for the hours of that agency," said Allen. "We've pointed all of those numbers to the 311 center, and now it's more constituent-friendly because we're open 24-hours a day, every day of the year. Even if constituents are used to dialing a certain number, they connect now to 311."

Baltimore, for example, used to direct calls about broken street lights to Baltimore Gas & Electric, which maintains three-quarters of the town's lights. "Now we have included the local utility in our CRM tool, CitiTrack, and can issue work orders and track their performance through the citywide system," Schlanger said.

A Citywide Answering Service

Eliminating phone-answering duties for department workers with more pressing tasks is an immediate benefit of 311 call centers. "311 helps departments free up resources to handle their core functions rather than having people work on getting callers in touch with whomever they need to speak with. I've had positive feedback in that respect," said David Dizon, director of Los Angeles' 311 division, which was launched November 2002.

Freeing up resources within departments can help jurisdictions deal with budget strains, said Austin's Collins. "Austin went through huge budget cuts last year, and we have department workers who answer the phones while doing other things," he said. "This will hopefully relieve the pressure on them so they can do what they're supposed to be doing."

That's almost certain to be true, said Scott Imhoff, marketing and portfolio manager for Motorola's

Public Service Solutions, which supplies Baltimore's and Chicago's 311 systems. "In our research, we've found that around 70 percent of calls tend to be for information requests rather than service. Proximity searches, for voting districts or the closest library, are also common. If your application has a large robust database that can be searched quickly, you can convey consistent, fast information to callers."

Thera Bradshaw, acting general manager of Los Angeles' Information Technology Agency, said consolidation could also save the city money. "We're looking to consolidate other call centers operating in the city," she said. "We're starting to look at eliminating toll-free 800 numbers as well, which will be a nice cost-savings."

Because of budget difficulties, Dizon said the Los Angeles 311 center works closely with departments. The city's graffiti department, for example, is currently under a hiring freeze, so the 311 center now answers service requests for graffiti removal and forwards that information to the reduced graffiti-removal staff.

Calling in Savings

Budget savings may be difficult to see because work is being shifted between departments that sometimes can't be easily compared. Still, 311 managers argue that having skilled workers spend their workday on projects for which they've been trained is clearly more cost-efficient than having them answer phones and forward calls.

New York City, which has the largest 311 system in the country, saw its call center budget rise while budgets for other departments were cut. The city spent \$21 million to start 311 in the Big Apple, and currently has a \$27 million annual operating budget with a staff of 375. But the investment has generated many paybacks, according to Gino Menchini, commissioner of the city's Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications. "[311] allows us to do more with less because we can see exactly how agencies are performing, and manage our existing assets better and smarter," he told *The New York Times*. "It's cost avoidance more than anything else."

As more data from 311 is fed into CRM systems, city officials find that by analyzing the details, they can begin to make strategic decisions on how city resources -- and services -- can be better managed. Every two weeks, Menchini and his staff send reports to New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and customized versions to the major departments every month. Not only does the data give officials precise data that can be acted on, such as pinpointing persistent illegal dumping problems, but it can also be used to set service standards for city agencies.

Ted O'Keefe, director of Chicago's five-year-old 311 system, said the savings and efficiencies gained from a central call center become much easier to recognize over time. The city's water department, for instance, used system data to pinpoint which fire hydrants were opened most frequently, then placed locking caps on those hydrants to ensure water pressure.

"All of the information in the system provides management support for decision-making and the allocation of resources," said O'Keefe. "Sometimes graffiti can be painted over, and sometimes it needs to be blasted off the surface. By analyzing data about graffiti calls, we have an idea of how many painters versus blasters we need."

Baltimore's Schlanger said the combination of 311, CitiTrack and CitiStat -- Baltimore's real-time management and accountability tools -- have produced more than \$100 million in savings and revenue enhancements over the past three years.

As an example of revenue enhancement, Schlanger cites improvements in how the water department handles leaks. "When the water maintenance crew found an outside meter that had a leak, it would put in a bypass pipe and refer meter replacement to another division in the water department," he said. "With CitiStat, we learned about tens of thousands of instances in which people were waiting for the bypasses to be replaced with meters. Now when the maintenance crew installs a bypass, the CRM tool automatically generates a request to the meter shop. By tracking these, we've reduced the number of bypass pipes by thousands, which has turned into millions of dollars in recaptured water revenue."

The real-time reports and streamlined nature of 311 systems allow for faster response from both officials and citizens. "In a bad storm, we can pinpoint areas that have more water on the streets and predict potential flooding," said O'Keefe. "And the Bureau of Traffic Services was able to reduce inventory at its auto pounds because the system produces automatic notices, which prompts people to get cars more quickly." Such efficiencies allow the city to reallocate money and resources, he said.

O'Keefe also touts the Chicago 311 system's ability to check duplicate requests, which is customized for each department. "If we have several people from one block calling about a streetlight that's out, all of those requests are bundled together," he said. "If several people call from the same apartment building rather than dispatch several inspectors, we dispatch only one." According to O'Keefe, the Bureau of Electricity alone within Chicago's Department of Streets and Sanitation estimates it saved \$6.9 million in 2003 by avoiding duplicate dispatches.

One of the most powerful features of Baltimore's and Chicago's 311 systems is avoiding duplicate service requests, said Imhoff. "What's important in the delivery of local government services is not who's calling, but where the event is taking place," he said. "But the system will still identify a unique tracking number for that call because you want the constituent to feel that he's participating. If the call taker says, 'We already know about that,' he may not call next time."

While improving the efficiency of government agencies is central to 311 and the data such systems collect, it's only half the picture. "Government is a mystery to many people, and 311 provides a port of entry to our services," said O'Keefe. "If people need birth certificates, normally the county issues those, but they can call us and we'll provide them with the information."

There's also a referral component and city management tools, O'Keefe said. "So we have to make sure that our information is accurate. Our city sets up warming and cooling centers [for use during winters and summers by those without means], and we have their locations built into the system so we can tell callers about the centers closest to their house. For callers who need energy assistance, we can direct them to the nearest center."

One thing that works well for Chicago, said O'Keefe, is that the city put the same system in 250 locations. "It doesn't matter if citizens enter requests online, by phone, or through the Alderman's Office or police agency because they all have access to the same system. And since each request is given its own tracking number, they can track the query through the system to monitor the status of that request."

Agencies can also begin to measure such things as average response time. They can use this information to set performance standards within an agency and provide citizens with realistic expectations on when a complaint will be addressed, a problem solved or a service rendered.

Schlanger said Baltimore's CitiTrack reduced the time it takes to clear dirty lots and alleys from months to 21 days. "We didn't have the tools for a strategic way to attack these problems," he said. "We would do first in, first out, or did work wherever crews happened to be." Now everything is address-based so the city can map out requests for services and figure out the most strategic ways to deploy workers, Schlanger said. "We have improved service intervals on nearly everything we do."

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